

BUILDING A JOINT FORCE ON THE FLY:
THE RELATIONSHIP OF ADMIRAL AUBREY W. FITCH AND
LIEUTENANT GENERAL MILLARD F. HARMON

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DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.



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ABSTRACT

The Solomons air campaign is an early example of a combined (New Zealand) and joint (Army, Navy, and Marine Corps) air campaign in World War II, led by two flag officers of different services. This campaign was pivotal to the allied advance in the Pacific theater but has inspired little study devoted to understanding how or why it was successful. Both Admiral Aubrey Fitch, as the Commander Air, South Pacific charged with leading all land-based aviation in the theater, and Lieutenant General Millard Harmon, Commanding General, South Pacific, the overall land component commander and an Army Air Forces officer with administrative control over Army aviation, had diverse interests and multiple bosses based on their services and positions. Both men managed to put aside differences and foster a professional and personal relationship that ensured the greater goal of victory in the Pacific was always at the forefront of their commands. The case of the Solomons air campaign provides an avenue to understanding how relationships and common goals can create a command environment that values unity over competition. Better understanding in this area can aid in the pursuit of unity of command and control in the battlespaces of today and the future.



CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
DISCLAIMER.	ii
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT.	v
INTRODUCTION.	1
1 MILLARD F. “MIFF” HARMON.	5
2 AUBREY W. “JAKEY” FITCH.	17
3 A ROCKY START	31
4 EVOLUTION TO EFFICIENCY.	43
CONCLUSIONS.	57
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	61

Illustrations

Figure

1	Aubrey W. Fitch with the US Naval Academy Track Team.	21
2	Admiral Fitch in command of Naval Air Station Norfolk, VA	26
3	USMC Solomon Islands Campaign Map, 1943.	37
4	COMAIRSOPAC change of command 20 September 1942.	41
5	LTG Harmon awards the DFC to VADM Fitch, 2 July 1943. . . .	52

Introduction

The 1942-1943 Solomon Islands Campaign in the South Pacific during WWII was the turning point in the war against Japan. This claim is not part of conventional wisdom, as many believe the Battle of Midway in June 1942 to be the actual moment the United States turned the tide in the Pacific with an overwhelming victory over the Japanese. But the personal diaries of Admiral Ugaki, the Japanese Combined Fleet Chief of Staff, referred to Midway as only a “small success” for the Americans.¹ This attitude came from empirical data available to the Japanese. The aircraft losses sustained by the Japanese Navy at Midway were significant, but when considering the replacements available, the total numbers were negligible: during the month of June 1942, the Japanese lost 1,641 aircraft and received 1,620 replacements.² While it is true that Japan lost many experienced aviators at Midway, the Japanese military still had many pilots in training, and they produced approximately 2,000 pilots in 1942, a number equal to the pilots they had at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor.³ Many of the Japanese pilots also had more time training and flying in their aircraft than their US counterparts when they were sent to the Pacific theater to fight. The Japanese accepted that they were defeated militarily in the Battle of Midway, but they did not accept that battle as the decisive point in the war.

Lieutenant General Maruyama Masao, Commander of the second division of the Imperial Japanese Army, knew the turning point in the Pacific lay in the Solomon Islands. He told his troops, “This is the decisive battle...a battle in which the rise or fall of the Japanese Empire

¹ John Prados. *Islands of Destiny: The Solomons Campaign and the Eclipse of the Rising Sun*. (New York: New American Library, 2012), 9.

² Prados, *Islands of Destiny*, 10.

³ Prados, *Islands of Destiny*, 11.

will be decided.”⁴ For him and others, victory in the Pacific depended on control of the Solomon Islands.

For the Allies, the Solomon Islands campaign was an early example of a genuinely joint campaign. The value of all services and components of the US military and its allies in the Pacific were harnessed for a synergistic effect.⁵ The fight for survival and the common goal of achieving victory against a common enemy brought together leaders of distinct backgrounds and understanding and enabled this synergy. Some of the names of these commanders are familiar, but others who were instrumental in the victories in the Solomon Islands remain in history’s shadows. Undoubtedly, Admirals Chester Nimitz and Bill Halsey are familiar to many, but their decisions were directly influenced by men subordinate to them as they advised on proper courses of action. Two of those men were Lieutenant General Millard Harmon, Commanding General, South Pacific (COMGENSOPAC) and Rear Admiral Aubrey Fitch, Commander Aircraft, South Pacific (COMAIRSOPAC).

Fitch and Harmon were familiar with war, and both served in WWI. Their backgrounds in assignments, duties, and command before WWII were similar despite coming from different services and provided a base for developing a relationship of trust that enabled them to come together and present Admiral Halsey, Commander, South Pacific (COMSOPAC) truly integrated air power. Still, they brought different perspectives to the South Pacific, and they required time to overcome initial biases. Their relationship started as a purely professional one, but as Harmon and Fitch worked together to solve immediate problems, the interaction changed as trust grew between the two.

⁴ Prados, *Islands of Destiny*, 106.

⁵ Thomas Alexander Hughes. “A General Airman, Millard Harmon and the South Pacific in World War II,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* issue no. 52, 2009, 156.

This thesis strives to offer a deeper understanding of both men. It begins with brief biographies, including their time at the Naval Academy and Military Academy at West Point. Their interest in sports and struggles with academics were common themes while they attended school. Upon graduation, each had formative assignments that shaped his views on the proper role of joint operations, command, and the appropriate role of aviation in warfare. Their assignments shaped their professional views and influenced the way they saw their own service and that of the other branches of the military. Their perspective on joint operations shifted depending on their current assignment or command, but both remained open to new possibilities. In the end, both had similar experiences that enhanced their ability to adapt and develop a relationship of trust.

Following the biographical backgrounds, the thesis offers an analysis of their relationship and its evolution. Chapter three begins with the opening of the Solomon Islands campaign, when Harmon was already serving in the theater but Fitch had yet to arrive. The invasion and first days of the battle for Guadalcanal shaped impressions and raised doubts for Harmon concerning how the Navy operated. The dire situation on Guadalcanal reinforced the need for all services to work together for mere survival. While this battle raged, Admiral Fitch arrived. He reached the area when there was little time to debate issues of command authorities as all commanders were focused on maintaining control of Guadalcanal despite devastating attacks that threatened to evict the US from the island.

With operations normalized and the dire situation on Guadalcanal surpassed, a potential rift began to emerge between Harmon and Fitch. A pivotal meeting to overcome this friction is the starting point of chapter four. This meeting allowed both Harmon and Fitch to agree to sound principles that made the use of aviation in the South Pacific more effective and efficient. The principles agreed to in that meeting helped

establish trust. The Solomon Islands campaign continued through island hopping to the North, culminating with the invasion of Bougainville.

During the almost two years General Harmon and Admiral Fitch worked together, their relationship evolved from professional to personal. The implementation of strategy involves human beings, and placing the right people, with the right experiences, at the right place in history, is not always going to happen as it did during the Solomon Islands campaign. Despite this, these two men can provide insight for any officer of any service at any time. Finding a common basis to develop a relationship of trust is possible and can be the keystone of a successful, unified operation.



Chapter 1

Millard F. “Miff” Harmon

Millard Fillmore Harmon Jr., affectionately known as Miff, was born on January 18, 1888 at Fort Mason, San Francisco, California to Millard F. Harmon Sr. and his wife, Madeline. Millard Harmon Sr. was a West Point graduate, a coastal artillery officer in the US Army, and the model of the man his son became as an adult. Young Miff’s experiences with his family growing up shaped his later interests, and undoubtedly influenced his thinking and actions as he attended West Point, gained a commission in the Army in the Infantry branch, and moved through the ranks to Lieutenant General.¹

Miff excelled at sports and enjoyed the outdoors with his father. He followed in his father’s footsteps in a significant way, and this led to his acceptance as a cadet at the US Military Academy at West Point in 1908. Although he was of average size, he excelled in sports while at West Point, including the honor of being the captain of the ice hockey team for two years. While excelling in sports and outdoor activities, Harmon did not have as much success academically. He graduated from West Point in 1912 with a class ranking of 74 of 96, an improvement from his sophomore year ranking of 82 of 98. Despite the unimpressive academic standing, Miff gained valuable understanding and tolerance for other people while at West Point, characteristics that served him well as he spent an entire career advocating for, and working with, disparate groups of individuals and organizations.²

Upon graduation, Millard F. Harmon, Jr. became an officer in the US Army in the Infantry Branch. In 1914, the same year his father

¹ Robert G. Novotny, “Tarmacs and Trenches, Lieutenant General Millard F. Harmon, Jr., USAAF,” (Thesis, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies), 2007, 4.

² Most of this paragraph’s information derives from Novotny’s SAASS Thesis, 4-6.

retired from the Army at the rank of Colonel, Miff received an assignment to the Philippines where his career path in the Army changed significantly. He became interested in flying during this assignment, when the Army Signal Corps set up an air school in the Philippines with the aim of conducting combined maneuvers with the infantry in the islands. This school and its pilots inspired Harmon to seek an opportunity in aviation service.³ In addition to seeing the pilots of the air school, Miff reconnected with another young officer whom he had known when a cadet at West Point and with whom he would shape military aviation for generations to come⁴: Lieutenant H.H. Arnold. Lieutenant Arnold was in the Philippines conducting aviation training.⁵

Upon Harmon's return to the US from the Philippines in 1915, the War Department granted his request to attend flight training. He graduated on October 15, 1916.⁶ After graduation, now 1st Lieutenant Harmon was assigned to the 1st Aero Squadron, where he flew in the Mexican Punitive Expedition in support of General John Pershing. The experience flying in austere environments with few successes shaped Harmon's thoughts and writings about the proper use of aviation forces in the future. While flying in Mexico, Harmon's started to realize the necessity for coordinated operations between the air forces and ground forces.

Shortly after his service in Mexico, Harmon was called upon in 1917 as a technical advisor in the Army Air Service.⁷ In this capacity, Harmon was asked to learn from the French all that he could about how they were using air power in World War I. As he observed and participated in flying operations with the French, the ideas he developed in Mexico that air and ground maneuver should be coordinated to be

³ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 8.

⁴ H. H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1949), 338.

⁵ Arnold, *Global Mission*, 44.

⁶ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 9.

⁷ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 14.

most effective was strengthened. Harmon also began to believe an airman should command the air forces. This realization occurred as Harmon saw the leaders of the French aviation groups having the final say if an airplane flew or not, regardless of the rank or position of the person requesting aerial support.⁸ This prerogative was especially important where, as Harmon often noted, ground force commanders insisted on air support when conditions of either the aircraft or weather were not sufficient to safely and successfully carry out a mission. The importance of a trained airman making decisions on how and when to use air power left a lasting impression on Harmon.

At the conclusion of WWI, Harmon returned to the US and was promoted permanently to the rank of Major and again to Lieutenant Colonel temporarily. After his promotions, he received orders to France Field, Canal Zone, Panama as the commander. Upon arrival, he was the first aviator to command the base. Lieutenant Colonel Harmon worked in Panama surveying the entire Canal Zone and scouting landing field locations, a task never previously accomplished.⁹ In addition to using his aviation and combat experience to improve aviation for the Army, Harmon saw the necessity of coordinating joint Navy and Army aviation exercises. These exercises were designed to better understand each service and how they uniquely employed air power and shared information to better use aviation in the Canal Zone.¹⁰

On July 1, 1920, after just under four years of aviation service, including the Punitive Expedition in Mexico and World War I, Millard F. Harmon, Jr. was permanently transferred to the Army Air Service from the Infantry branch.¹¹ After this transfer, Harmon served in Washington D.C. on the advisory board of the Air Service, where he was part of a

⁸ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 18.

⁹ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 22.

¹⁰ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 23.

¹¹ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 24.

group charged with solving difficult problems for Air Service leaders. One of the issues Harmon dealt with during his time on the advisory board was coordinating the aviation activities of the Army and the Navy.

Drawing on his experiences in war and as the commander of France Field where he conducted joint exercises with the Navy, Major Harmon, now back to his permanent rank, authored a 21-page document outlining the similarities, differences, and unique abilities of the different services' aviation branches. Harmon believed in the necessity of utilizing both services' aviation capabilities to defend the U.S. coastline, given the realities of a post-war drawdown of forces. As such, Harmon realized that much of the training in each service was redundant and needed to be accomplished by a small force of regular officers who could quickly train additional air service personnel in the event of a new war.¹²

Major Harmon detailed the distinct capabilities of Naval aviation in regards to operations from a ship or submarine while the Army operated from land-based aerodromes. He pointed to the necessity of maintaining separate aviation services based on these unique qualities, but emphasized the similarity in the mission to defend the coast of the US, regardless of where aircraft took off and landed. The mission of coastal defense, Harmon stipulated, should include Naval aircraft that were not suitable for service in the fleet, but could augment Army aviation activities effectively.¹³

Harmon's experience working with the Navy in the Canal Zone led him to a truly revolutionary idea: He proposed that in the event of war, Army aviators should be transferred to the Navy to augment the fleet. Harmon stated his belief that the fleet was the first line of defense for the country. He continued this line of reasoning, and assumed in later

¹² Millard F. Harmon, "A Consideration of the General Subject of Cooperative Action Between the Aeronautical Activities of the Army and the Navy," 21 February, 1922. 168.604-12, AFHRA, 7.

¹³ Harmon, *Considerations*, 9.

phases of the war, Naval aviators would transfer to the Army in furtherance of the ground warfare missions.¹⁴ This forward thinking about the value of an aviator, no matter his service affiliation, showed Major Harmon believed in setting aside service parochialism to accomplish overall wartime objectives. This attitude served Harmon well in his future assignment in the South Pacific in WWII.

The transfer of flying personnel from one service to another required each service to be familiar with the other's methods. As a result, Harmon advocated for joint training as a means to exercise coordinated control and command by a single commander of all aviation activities in a single theater of operations.¹⁵ This method of achieving unity of command in the air is what current military aviators know as the Joint Force Aviation Component Commander, or JFACC. Harmon's forward thinking about a single air commander stemmed from his experiences in Mexico and France, and was his belief that this method of employing air power would result in the most effective air campaign. In this belief, Harmon was decades ahead of other officers.

Major Harmon concluded his recommendations to the Air Service Advisory Board by emphatically stating that joint maneuvers between the Navy and Army were not only necessary in coast defense, but should extend to all elements of maneuver that would require coordination in times of war. After he focused on joint air activities, Harmon, almost as an afterthought, advocated for the staffs of each services' aeronautical branches to be located in close proximity to each other to encourage coordination and cooperation through the mere fact of familiarity.¹⁶ Harmon had the opportunity to practice and refine his ideas throughout his career as he practiced and studied the importance of joint operations.

¹⁴ Harmon, *Considerations*, 10.

¹⁵ Harmon, *Considerations*, 13.

¹⁶ Harmon, *Considerations*, 21.

Major Harmon was selected to attend the Army War College in 1924. While he attended, he was placed on a committee with five other officers, including a Navy Commander. The committee pursued a revision of the “Joint Army and Navy Action in Coastal Defense,” a subject for which Harmon’s expertise was a natural fit.¹⁷ The committee members concurred that a complete revision of the pamphlet was necessary. In their new document, the committee outlined how joint operations could be improved. The first task was to have a clear strategic objective with the assignment of clear missions to the Army and the Navy.¹⁸ With the objective and missions defined, one of the services was to have the primary responsibility in a theater of operations, and with that responsibility, that service would have the necessary authority, meaning that service would provide the senior officer to exercise joint command.¹⁹ This principle of unity of command by one joint commander would be used by Harmon on more than one occasion as he argued for more control of Army aviation units.

The memorandum was dominated by pragmatism and thoughtfulness about how to be effective in a joint campaign. The overarching theme emerged in the middle of the document. The message was not a prescription or checklist on what to do, but rather, a guide to pursue the course of action that resulted in the greatest advantage for the US in the conduct of joint operations.²⁰ A major part of gaining the greatest advantage was the specially trained and organized landing troops. These forces needed the proper equipment to secure the landing area and further fortify it through the use of special equipment. The necessity of preparing the landing site for further use was seen as an

¹⁷ Memorandum for: The Assistant Commandant, The Army War College, “Joint Army and Navy Action in Coastal Defense,” 23 May 1925, in Personal Papers of Col Harmon, 168.604-17, IRIS No. 00124148, AFHRA.

¹⁸ Harmon, *Memorandum for: The Assistant Commandant*, 4.

¹⁹ Harmon, *Memorandum for: The Assistant Commandant*, 4.

²⁰ Harmon, *Memorandum for: The Assistant Commandant*, 29.

ideal, even if not always attainable immediately.²¹ The best probability of success came through the support of the air service during a landing operation. This support from the air would mainly come through naval aviation until construction of a suitable landing field or the acquisition of an enemy field was complete. Forethought and preplanning where the landing field would be and how to secure it for operations by land-based aircraft could speed the process.²²

According to the committee, the location of where troops came ashore for an invasion and how to resupply those troops required consideration prior to an operation. Without proper advance planning, success was not likely during follow on operations as supplies dwindled. This planning required forethought on how to load transports, ensuring all the proper people and equipment were available to secure the new base of operations.²³ Otherwise, the operational advantage would decline due to improper supplies in the new area of operation. This section of the committee's memorandum, although logical, was not standard practice at the time. The work Harmon did on this committee impacted future operations of both the Navy and Army, and foreshadowed much of Harmon's contributions in the Solomon Islands.

Upon completion of War College and the acceptance of the Joint Army and Navy Action pamphlet by the War and Navy Departments, Harmon moved through various jobs and eventually ended up at Luke Field, Hawaii in December 1936, taking command of the field and the 5th Bombardment Group.²⁴ True to his past, Harmon led his bombardment group through joint Army and Navy air and sea exercises. Harmon wrote about joint operations and he gained needed practical experience through joint training with the Navy. He continued to believe the best

²¹ Harmon, *Memorandum for: The Assistant Commandant*, 56.

²² Harmon, *Memorandum for: The Assistant Commandant*, 59.

²³ Harmon, *Memorandum for: The Assistant Commandant*, 61.

²⁴ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 26.

results came through joint operations even when these operations did not fully conform with the pamphlet for joint operations. He strengthened his previous beliefs, but began to form ideas concerning Naval officers' ability to command Army aviation.

Upon the conclusion of one joint Army and Navy exercise, dubbed Fleet Problem XIX, Colonel Harmon penned a letter to Brigadier General Arnold on May 7, 1938, with his reflections on the success of the exercise. In this letter, Harmon emphasized the missed opportunity to have coordinated with the Navy and have his crews indoctrinated by the Naval aviators before the start of the exercise. Lack of pre-coordination and indoctrination significantly handicapped the Army bombers, but was justifiable because of the time necessary to test and train on their new bomber, the B-18.²⁵ Nonetheless, the use of Army aviation in Fleet Problem XIX was significant. Fleet Problem XIX exercised the specific task of defending the Hawaiian Islands against an enemy attack, and the method to assure success included heavy use of Army aviation to search and attack enemy ships while protecting US forces.²⁶ The inclusion of Harmon's unit from Luke Field provided a proving ground to implement his thoughts and writings about joint operations.

Following Fleet Problem XIX, Colonel Harmon noted that the Navy system was not the same as the Army system, and as a general rule, Naval aviators did not believe in centralized command and decentralized execution of air operations. This realization prompted Harmon to write that the Army must guard the command of its aviation assets in all future associations with the Navy.²⁷ This account was the first time Harmon did not advocate for unity of command as he had for the past 16

²⁵ Headquarters Luke Field letter from Col Harmon to Brig Gen Arnold, 7 May, 1938, in Personal Papers of Colonel Harmon, 168.604-11A, AFHRA, 1.

²⁶ Hughes, Thomas Alexander. *Admiral Bill Halsey: A Naval Life*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016) 124.

²⁷ Harmon, *Letter from Headquarters Luke Field*, 1.

years, and it would not be the last time he challenged the idea of a Navy commander controlling Army aviation.

Two months after completing the exercises in Hawaii, Colonel Harmon relinquished command of Luke Field and the 5th Bombardment Group.²⁸ Harmon was transferred to Maxwell Field, Alabama to serve as the Vice Commandant of the Air Corps Tactical School. He served in this capacity for two years and used the time to focus the curriculum on the practical application of aviation. Harmon relied on his personal experiences in the Mexican Punitive Expedition, WWI, and his efforts towards transforming how Army Aviation worked with other services.

A major part of Harmon's transformation of Air Corps education ran counter to the evolved conventional wisdom of air power thinking. The idea that high-altitude, precision bombing of an industrial web could win a war permeated ACTS. Colonel Harmon's experiences in Mexico and France brought him to another conclusion: that the critical link enabling air power on a battlefield was coordination with units on the ground. His experiences and thoughts led him to coordinate and execute combined arms exercises with the Infantry School located close to Maxwell Field at Ft. Benning, Georgia.

Upon the conclusion of the exercises, Harmon wrote to the commandant of the Infantry School heralding its success and the valuable learning that took place.²⁹ General Arnold also praised the Infantry School; however, in a separate letter regarding the same subject, Arnold cautioned Harmon not to turn ACTS into a ground combat school.³⁰ It is reasonable to think Colonel Harmon anticipated such

²⁸ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 28.

²⁹ Colonel M.F. Harmon, Assistant Commandant, Air Corps Tactical School, to Colonel C.H. Hodges, Assistant Commandant, The Infantry School, letter, 2 February 1940, in Personal Collection of Millard F. Harmon, 168.604-11A, IRIS No. 00124142, AFHRA.

³⁰ Major General H.H. Arnold, Chief of the Air Corps, to Colonel C.H. Hodges, Assistant Commandant, The Infantry School, letter, 30 January 1940, in Personal Collection of Millard F. Harmon, 168.604-11A, IRIS No. 00124142, AFHRA.

criticism from an old friend who was dedicated fully to the mission of the Air Corps. Harmon took the warning in stride and reassured Arnold that his aim was congruent with Arnold's as he used the training to produce better aviators with a fuller understanding of other branches of the Army. This reasoning satisfied General Arnold and allowed Colonel Harmon to continue educating Army aviators based on his personal experiences in wartime and joint exercises.

After completing his tour as the ACTS Vice Commandant, Colonel Harmon took command of the Gulf Coast Air Corps Training Center at Randolph Field, Texas. In this role, Harmon was tasked to produce 7,000 pilots a year.³¹ Colonel Harmon met this challenge and was on track to accomplish the goal set forth by War Department. Much like the military today, Colonel Harmon's reward for his good work was more challenging work. Harmon was promoted to Brigadier General and again transferred to a new base.

Brigadier General Harmon took command of Hamilton Field, California on November 22, 1940, as the base transitioned from a bomber field to a pursuit field.³² While Harmon was assigned to Hamilton Field, Arnold sent him to England to observe the war in Europe. Harmon was a natural choice for this type of work, as he had accomplished the same mission in France during WWI prior to the US involvement there. In England, General Harmon gained valuable insight not only on the ins and outs of how Britain was fighting its air war but also on how to juggle multiple bosses in Washington D.C., because Harmon supplied information through the G2 channels of the Army and also worked with President Roosevelt's special Air Advisor.³³ Learning the skill to serve two masters at the same time proved vital in General

³¹ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 42.

³² Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 43.

³³ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 43.

Harmon's future role as Commanding General, South Pacific (COMGENSOPAC).

In addition to learning to serve multiple bosses, Harmon gained a very simple and practical insight on how to wage an effective air campaign while he was an observer in England. The simple observation was that aerodromes needed permanent, serviceable runways. Without them, running an air campaign proves difficult.³⁴ This same observation prompted General Harmon to address the issue of airfield suitability with General Arnold a month after the invasion of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands.³⁵

After General Harmon's six months in England, he returned to the US and held multiple assignments and was promoted to Major General on July 11, 1941. During this time, the War Department created the Army-Air Forces, promoting Arnold to Lieutenant General and making him the first Chief.³⁶ A month after being made Chief, Arnold called on Harmon, his friend of more than thirty years, to be the Chief of the Air Staff, reporting directly to Arnold.³⁷

As the Chief of the Air Staff, Major General Harmon was aware of combat in the Pacific Theater, which reinforced his belief that Navy and Army air officers saw warfare differently. The Battle of Midway in the early days of June 1942 provided evidence to Harmon that the Navy did not understand how to employ land-based aviation effectively. The reports back from the battle were a reality check for the newly formed Army Air Forces as Arnold was hit with criticism for the tactics employed and their lack of results.³⁸ Presumably, in the eyes of Harmon, the lack

³⁴ Diary of General Harmon for Mrs. Harmon – 1941, 18 Jan 1941 – 31 Mar 41, Book No. 2, in Millard F. Harmon Papers, 168.604-46, IRIS No. 00124170, AFHRA, 18.

³⁵ Headquarters USAFISPA, 1.

³⁶ Bill Yenne, *Hap Arnold: The General Who Invented the U.S Air Force*. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery History, 2013), 86.

³⁷ Novotny, *Tarmacs and Trenches*, 51.

³⁸ Arnold, *Global Mission*, 379.

of results stemmed from the improper utilization of Army aviation by the Navy. Many AAF officers felt that the Naval officer in charge did not fully understand or exploit the capabilities of AAF units. This lack of understanding by the Navy was the reason they accused the AAF of tactical failures during the Battle of Midway.³⁹ The disagreements during the Battle of Midway highlighted the differences between Naval and Army air officers.

The growing tensions between the Army and Navy in the Pacific inspired General George Marshall to create a position for a senior Army officer to be in command of all Army forces in the Joint Task Force. The key for Marshall was to have a competent officer that understood the Army, Aviation, and how to work with the Navy. The choice was made to send Major General Millard “Miff” Harmon to the difficult assignment.⁴⁰ This new assignment would be the ultimate test of Harmon’s ideas, writings, and experiences regarding joint Army and Navy aviation action under the principle of unity of command. Major General Harmon had to find a way to work effectively with the Navy in the South Pacific.

³⁹ Major General M.F. Harmon to Lieutenant General H.H. Arnold, Memorandum for the Commanding General, Army Air Forces: Subject: tactical Command of Army Air Units, 15 July 1942, in Personal Collection of Millard F. Harmon, 705.164-1, IRIS No. 0251262, AFHRA

⁴⁰ Louis Morton, *United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific, Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (1962; new imprint, Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2000), 260.

Chapter 2

Aubrey W. “Jakey” Fitch

Aubrey Wray Fitch was born on June 11, 1883 in St. Ignace, Michigan to Ernest and Emily Fitch. Fitch had a desire to serve in the armed services of the United States and see the world.¹ Fitch's attendance and graduation from Saint John's military academy in Wisconsin drove his desire to be a military man. Following graduation, Fitch sought an appointment to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD. His second attempt resulted in acceptance and an invitation to attend medical screening before final appointment as a Naval Cadet.²

While attending the Naval Academy, Fitch excelled as an athlete. He ran track in the quarter and half-mile distances, was on the gymnastics team, boxed, played football, and was on the crew team.³ His sporting association is where he earned his nickname “Jakey”, which stuck with him throughout his life.⁴ Fitch not only excelled in sports; he prided himself on being a referee for nineteen disputes outside the gym. Ensuring fair fights between other cadets produced unfavorable results, such as losing two stripes. He referred to this as being a “clean sleeve,” meaning he had no official rank. The reason he gave for the loss of rank was aiding and abetting in disorder.⁵ Fitch recorded the occasion with

¹ Admiral James Stockdale (speech at launching ceremony of the USS Aubrey Fitch, Bath, Maine, 17 October 1981). In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey Fitch. Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 1.

² US Naval Academy acceptance letter. 11 April 1902. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey Fitch. Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 5, Scrapbook.

³ The Lucky Bag, Volume XIII, pg. 81. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey Fitch. Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 5, The Luck Bag.

⁴ Edward Pinkowski, “Admiral of the Air,” *Our Navy*, mid-April 1945, Accessed at <http://www.wartimepress.com/archivearticle.asp?TID=Admiral%20of%20the%20Air&MID=68&q=30&FID=738>

⁵ Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch (handwritten note while at the US Naval Academy, no date). In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey Fitch. Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 5, Scrapbook.

humor and sarcasm by noting and underlining he once held a rank for “nearly a whole month.”⁶ Fitch’s love of sports built friendships that influenced him later in his service. He boxed with Spuds Ellyson, the Navy’s first pilot, and another early Naval aviator, Ken Whiting. Additionally, Admirals Halsey and Fitch wrestled together at the Academy and continued wrestling each other even in the South Pacific.⁷



Figure 1. Aubrey W. Fitch (Second from Left) with the Naval Academy track team.
Source: Admiral Fitch personal collection, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA

Aubrey Fitch’s wit and talent in athletics did not translate to the classroom. This future superintendent of the Naval Academy was the “goat” all four years at the academy, ranked very last in his class. Throughout Admiral Fitch’s personal papers there are many handwritten notes to professors requesting a change in grades. None of the notes made excuses for the poor grades; rather they pointed out technicalities as justification for raising the grade. There were no responses in his

⁶ Fitch, *Handwritten note*.

⁷ Pinkowski, *Admiral of the Air*.

personal papers from the professors, but regardless of any grade changes and being last in his class four years running, Aubrey Fitch left the Naval Academy in 1906 with a solid reputation for honor, integrity, and personal appeal.⁸

Following graduation, Fitch served two years of sea duty, as required by law, before gaining his commission as an Ensign.⁹ During his time at sea, Fitch developed his reputation as a good seaman. Upon his commission, Fitch continued his service at sea aboard the USS *Rainbow* and USS *Concord*.¹⁰ He then received further instruction in torpedoes before his assignment to help outfit the new battleship USS *Delaware*. Fitch then returned to the Naval Academy where he served, ironically, as the discipline officer before becoming an athletics instructor.¹¹

Fitch, then a Lieutenant, returned to sea in the Atlantic Command. He served on the staff of the Commander in Chief, Atlantic Command as the athletic officer.¹² His service and past reputation as a good seaman then earned him his first command. Fitch took command of the USS *Yankton* in 1915 and served until 1917 while concurrently acting as the aide to the Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet.¹³ With command under his belt, Fitch was reassigned as a gunnery officer on the USS *Wyoming* shortly after the US became involved in WWI. Fitch remained on the *Wyoming* for the duration of WWI.¹⁴ The assignment on the *Wyoming*

⁸ Vice President George Bush (Remarks at commissioning of the USS Aubrey Fitch, Bath, Maine, 9 October 1982). In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey Fitch. Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 1.

⁹ Biography of Admiral Aubrey Fitch, Naval History and Heritage Command. Accessed at <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/a/aubrey-fitch.html>

¹⁰ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

¹¹ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

¹² Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

¹³ Commander C.R. Burke, (Letter to Mr. Robert Cook, Editor, Who's who in American Education, 19 February 1946). In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 1, Folder General Correspondence J-Z.

¹⁴ Burke, *Letter to Mr. Cook*.

started Fitch's appreciation for service outside his comfort zone, as the *Wyoming* was attached to the 6th Battle Squadron of the British Grand Fleet.¹⁵

After WWI, Fitch served in different assignments on land and sea, which allowed him to broaden his experience as a naval officer. One of these assignments came in December 1922 and further shaped Fitch's ability to adapt to new ways of doing business and dealing with people of differing perspectives. This pivotal assignment for Fitch was in Rio de Janeiro as a member of the US mission to Brazil, where he served for five years.¹⁶

During his years in Brazil, Fitch not only served with Brazilian naval officers, but he also formed friendships that endured through his career. Throughout his personal papers, Fitch has personal correspondence with many Brazilian officers, showing the strong bonds Fitch formed while in Brazil. In addition to his duties advising Brazilian naval officers, Fitch learned to mingle with ambassadors and high-ranking military officers. One such occasion offered Fitch the opportunity to have lunch with General John J. Pershing at the request of the U.S. Ambassador.¹⁷ While in Brazil, Fitch garnered the attention of senior officials in the U.S. government. In addition to the personal invitation to eat lunch with General Pershing at a tennis club, Mrs. Fitch, while in Washington D.C., attended a reception at the White House by invitation of President and Mrs. Harding.¹⁸ The meetings with ambassadors, generals, and Brazilian officers shaped Fitch's views on how to accomplish a job. The Fitch's time in Rio de Janeiro ended in

¹⁵ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

¹⁶ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

¹⁷ Invitation to Commander and Mrs. Fitch from U.S. Ambassador to Brazil. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 6 Scrapbook.

¹⁸ Invitation to Mrs. Fitch from President and Mrs. Harding. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 6 Scrapbook.

March 1927 when he was reassigned to the Navy Department briefly before heading back to sea duty.¹⁹

Commander Fitch continued to expand his horizons as a naval officer. In May of 1927, he returned to sea as the executive officer of the battleship *Nevada*. Within a few months, Fitch left his post as executive officer to assume command of the store ship *Artic* in November 1927.²⁰ While in command of the *Artic*, Fitch received a circular letter from the Navy urging senior officers to consider transferring to aviation. The Navy needed to fill billets of aircraft carrier commanders.²¹ Fitch thought flying would be a good fit but had some reservations.

Due to the dangerous nature of flying, Fitch worried about the well-being of his family should a mishap occur. He was also not a young man at the age of 46 when the Navy requested senior officers take up flying. After discussion with his family, Fitch decided to take private flying lessons on his own to ensure he enjoyed the air as much as he enjoyed the sea. Upon completion of about 100 hours flying, neither his men on the *Artic* nor his family were surprised when Fitch decided to accept the Navy's invitation and go to flight school.²²

Commander Fitch reported to Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida for flight training in June 1929. Only eight months after arrival, Fitch earned his wings as a Naval aviator on 4 February 1930.²³ Although Fitch was 46 years old and had over 20 years of service before earning his wings, he was a good pilot and could fly well.²⁴ With a solid reputation as a seaman and now recognized as a capable pilot, Fitch was ready to continue commanding, now with more opportunities available to him as an aviator.

¹⁹ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

²⁰ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

²¹ Pinkowski, *Admiral of the Air*.

²² Pinkowski, *Admiral of the Air*.

²³ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

²⁴ Admiral Stockdale, *Speech*.

Fitch's first command after earning his wings was the USS *Wright* (AV-1).²⁵ The *Wright* was a perfect fit for an experienced seaman and a new pilot as it was a seaplane tender. The mission of the USS *Wright* was support of seaplanes. The ship was a versatile platform that provided all necessary support to aircraft and their crews, enabling reconnaissance missions further from a port facility. In addition to providing support, the USS *Wright* was able to hoist smaller seaplanes onto the ship for transit. The command of the *Wright* provided Fitch the opportunity to continue refinement of old skills while practicing newly acquired abilities as an aviator. Fitch had the best of both worlds in the Navy.

After commanding the *Wright*, Fitch took command of his first aircraft carrier, the USS *Langley* (CV-1). With the command of the *Langley* came a promotion to Captain in 1931. His stay on the *Langley* only lasted one year. During that year, Fitch maintained his outstanding credentials as a commanding officer in the fleet and at the same time built his reputation as a pilot. When his year on the *Langley* came to a close, Fitch found himself with orders to command again, but this time on land.

Captain Fitch commanded Naval Air Station Norfolk, VA from 1932 to 1935. His mission at Norfolk was first and foremost to train pilots and build the base. During his time at Norfolk, he gained an understanding of all that was necessary to run an airfield. Perhaps more importantly, Fitch gained an in-depth knowledge of the advantages and challenges of operating land-based aircraft. He had not inherited a command with all the duties well known and assigned. Norfolk was in its infancy and needed expansion. Fitch met the challenge head-on and built the base to accommodate the mission while gaining valuable insight into the intimate workings of a fixed base operation.

²⁵ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

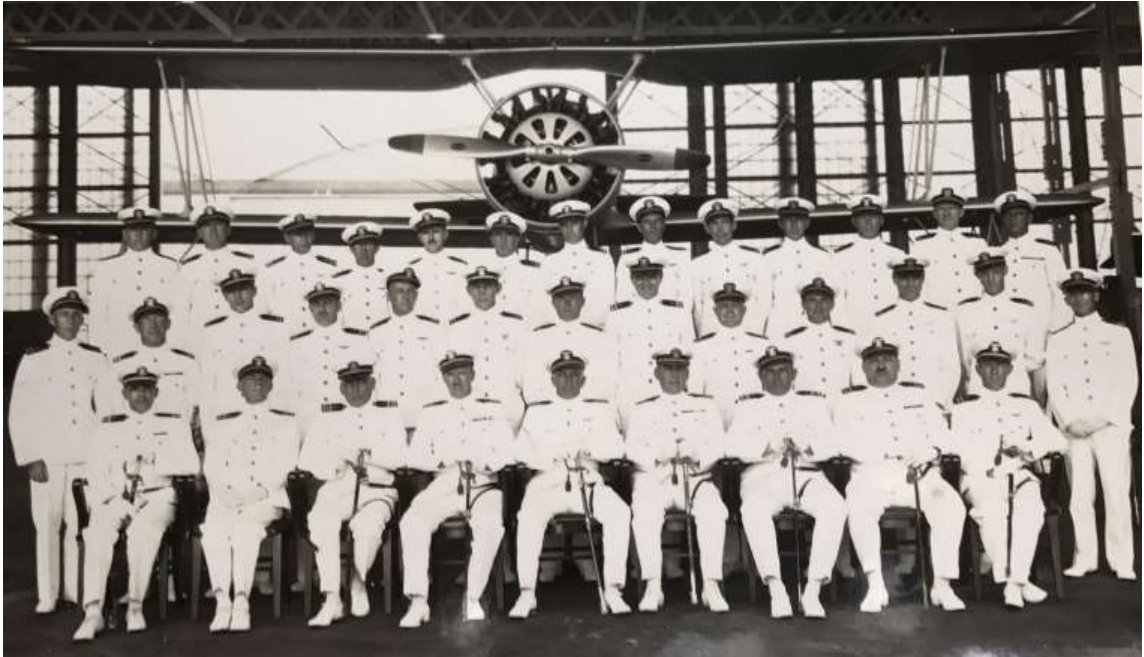


Figure 2: Admiral Fitch in command of Naval Air Station Norfolk, VA 1932-1935.

Source: Admiral Fitch personal collection, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA

Fitch departed NAS Norfolk to fill the billet of the chief of staff to the Commander, Aircraft, Battle Force.²⁶ In this position, Fitch served under Admiral Harris Laning, former president of the Naval War College. The role of the battle force was the integration of all types of ships and aircraft and was a means to organize the fleet into functional units. Fitch was able to see a much larger Navy than he previously experienced as a commanding officer of a ship or Naval Air Station. Remarkably, the closest Fitch had been to this view was as a Lieutenant serving on the staff of the Commander in Chief of the Atlantic Fleet.

When Fitch departed his service as the chief of staff to Admiral Laning, he took command of his second aircraft carrier, skippering the USS *Lexington* (CV-2) from April 1936 to June 1937. Fitch now had a fuller understanding of how his aircraft carrier fit into the combined fleet. He did not have a lack of knowledge in his previous commands, but after

²⁶ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

serving as the chief of staff to the Commander, Aircraft, Battle Force, it was not a long logical jump to understand that any good commander continued to grow in knowledge about how his part played in the larger organization. This professional growth was especially true of Fitch as he was part of the organization designed to facilitate distinct capabilities of the fleet in combined operations. At the time, the Battle Fleet was organized to conduct integrated operations utilizing distinct classes of ships. The integration of carriers in the Battle Fleet logically included integration of naval aviation in combined fleet maneuvers, and Fitch gained a first-hand knowledge of how the Navy operated together to execute a common mission.

With successful command of the USS *Lexington* complete, Fitch received orders to be a student at the Naval War College. Although there is no correspondence linking his time as chief of staff to Admiral Laning and his orders to Naval War College, the assignment to the school where his commander was president certainly did not hurt Fitch. Additionally, Fitch's new assignment, coupled with his command of the *Lexington*, shed light on his abilities as a staff officer.

While at the Naval War College, Captain Fitch wrote a thesis about trends in US foreign policy. His thesis provided insight into how he viewed factors which influence relationships. Although Fitch specifically referred to the relationship between the US and other countries in Central and South America, his ideas translated to intrapersonal interactions. Fitch first asserted that relationships were made difficult due to differences in language and culture.²⁷ The same language and cultural differences existed between the Army and Navy. The purposes of the services were unique and therefore resulted in a cultural divide that led to distinct views on how to conduct warfare and how to use the tools

²⁷ Captain Aubrey W. Fitch, "Present Trends in the Foreign Policies of the United States as Affecting the Monroe Doctrine and the Caribbean Policy," Thesis (Naval War College, Newport R.I., 18 April 1938), 17.

of war most effectively. Fitch's remedy to overcome the language and culture divide was an attitude of friendliness, understanding, and trust in the motives and purposes of others.²⁸

In addition to trust, Captain Fitch referred to the good neighbor policy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration as a means to further break down barriers of suspicion.²⁹ The idea of being a good neighbor, according to Fitch, led directly to breaking down the cultural and language barriers and thereby promoted good will and understanding between people. Fitch wrote, "cultural and language differences has been a decided element in retarding the development of good will and understanding."³⁰ Additionally, if one acts as a good neighbor, misunderstandings were avoided and, "what greater practical benefit to the United States can there be than a co-operative relationship...free from suspicion and mistrust."³¹

Looking back on Fitch's experiences in athletics, working with the British Navy in WWI, and as a member of the US mission to Brazil, it is easy to see how he developed his thinking that honesty and forthrightness could overcome any mistrust or cultural differences. Although his writing at Naval War College did not focus on his new career in flying, it did provide him the opportunity to refine his thoughts on how success is possible in situations beyond the scope of the Navy. Later put into practice by Fitch when in command, his ideas, personality, and experiences helped him overcome many obstacles, particularly his bias against how other services in the US military operated.

After finishing Naval War College in June 1938, Fitch returned to Naval Air Station Pensacola as its commander. This assignment was Fitch's second time in command of a Naval Air Station, but his first

²⁸ Fitch, *Present Trends in the Foreign Policies of the United States*, 17.

²⁹ Fitch, *Present Trends in the Foreign Policies of the United States*, 24.

³⁰ Fitch, *Present Trends in the Foreign Policies of the United States*, 26.

³¹ Fitch, *Present Trends in the Foreign Policies of the United States*, 27.

commanding an established NAS. He did not need to build the base, just focus on training new naval aviators. His time at NAS Pensacola only lasted a year and a half and he departed for Pearl Harbor June 1940 to take command of Patrol Wing Two, then based at Ford Island.³²

Captain Fitch had a short command at Patrol Wing Two. In his personal memorandum, he recalled commanding for only four months while the official Navy history listed him as commander for seven. Regardless of the discrepancy, while in command Fitch focused training his patrol wing on the development of Western island bases to provide searches for Japanese forces at much greater distances.³³ Fitch surmised that no adequate warning of an attack by the Japanese was possible with the limited number of patrol aircraft in the wing. For this reason, Fitch focused his efforts to obtain more equipment and aircraft.³⁴ All of Fitch's efforts in Hawaii continued beyond his departure in October 1940 when he left Patrol Wing Two and took command of Carrier Division One, which consisted of the carriers USS *Saratoga* and USS *Lexington*, with a promotion to Rear Admiral Lower Half.³⁵

During his time as the commander of Carrier Division One, Fitch concerned himself primarily with training operations on the West coast of the US.³⁶ On December 7, 1941, Admiral Fitch was aboard the USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) traveling from Washington to its home port in San Diego, CA. When he learned of the Pearl Harbor attack, he reflected on his time as Commander, Patrol Wing Two and had not expected an attack there, but it also did not surprise him.³⁷ Ironically, Fitch learned of the surprise attack while on board the same carrier that three years earlier

³² Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Commander Air, South Pacific, memorandum, 8 April 1944. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 1, Folder General Correspondence A-I.

³³ Fitch, *Memorandum*, 1.

³⁴ Fitch, *Memorandum*, 2.

³⁵ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

³⁶ Fitch, *Memorandum*, 2.

³⁷ Fitch, *Memorandum*, 2.

in 1938, during fleet problem XIX, had successfully launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.³⁸ Fitch, as one of the most experienced carrier commanders in the Navy, and the USS *Saratoga* sailed for Pearl Harbor on 8 December 1941.

Admiral Fitch was redirected to Wake Island to provide reinforcements. During this operation, the USS *Saratoga* was torpedoed and needed extensive repairs. This reduction in carrier fleet strength in the Pacific came at a critical time, and required Fitch's reassignment to his former command, the USS *Lexington*, to continue leading Carrier Division One.³⁹ It was aboard the *Lexington* that Fitch served in the Battle of the Coral Sea as the commander of Task Group 17.5, consisting of the USS *Lexington* and USS *Yorktown*'s aircraft.⁴⁰

Just before the battle of the Coral Sea, Admiral Fitch was designated Officer in Tactical Command by Task Force 17 commander Admiral Frank J. Fletcher. In this capacity, Admiral Fitch oversaw the first naval action in history where opposing fleets never saw one another.⁴¹ Fitch launched successful aviation attacks against the Japanese fleet, but the toll on the US carrier fleet was almost unbearable. The USS *Yorktown*, with TF 17 commander Admiral Fletcher on board, took a direct hit in the flight deck with an 800-pound bomb. Additionally, the USS *Lexington*, with Admiral Fitch on board, suffered two bomb hits and two torpedo hits.⁴² The USS *Lexington* was the first US aircraft carrier lost in the war when the ship was ordered abandoned after a fire erupted causing multiple explosions. After all men were off the ship, the *Lexington* was torpedoed.

³⁸ USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) Fact Sheet. Accessed on 22 March 2017 at http://www.navy.mil/navydata/nav_legacy.asp?id=12

³⁹ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

⁴⁰ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

⁴¹ William Tuohy. *America's Fighting Admirals*. (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007), 77.

⁴² Edwin Palmer Hoyt. *How They Won the War in the Pacific; Nimitz and His Admirals*. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1970), 83.

As the USS *Lexington* was going down, Admiral Fitch transferred his flag to the USS *Minneapolis* to continue his duties as Task Group 17.5's commander. While on board the *Minneapolis*, Fitch made a point of visiting the sick bay to see the wounded men from the *Lexington*.⁴³ Despite the stress of losing two carriers, both of which he had commanded, Admiral Fitch's personality drew him to care for the wounded men who fought for him. Although the Battle of the Coral Sea produced heavy losses for the US, it was the first time the US halted the Japanese fleet in the Pacific.⁴⁴

As the air commander for TF 17, Admiral Fitch was pleased with the actions of the naval aviators. He was less than enthusiastic with what Army aviation brought to the fight. The Battle of the Coral Sea and Admiral Fitch's perception that shore-based aircraft provided no attack or informational support to the fleet prompted him to provide written testimony to the US Senate Committee on Naval Affairs after the war was over. He offered this testimony unsolicited, as he believed his experience in the South Pacific warranted him adding to the debate about the Navy retaining control of land-based aircraft. In his testimony to the committee chairman, Senator David Walsh, Admiral Fitch testified that due to a lack of naval patrol squadrons, the Navy was required to use Army Air Forces fliers as they were all that were available to the fleet before and during the Battle of the Coral Sea, and this reliance on the Army Air Forces had seriously handicapped the Naval Task Force.⁴⁵

Admiral Fitch continued his testimony focusing on the training necessary to satisfactorily perform basic naval tasks. Due to the lack of specific training of Army Air Forces airmen in areas particular to Naval warfare, Fitch believed, their performance was insufficient during crucial

⁴³ Naval History and Heritage Command, *Admiral Fitch biography*.

⁴⁴ Hoyt, *How They Won the War in the Pacific*, 84.

⁴⁵ Written Testimony to the United States Senate Committee on Naval Affairs, dated 12 July 1946. In personal papers of Aubrey Wray Fitch. Box 1, Folder: General Correspondence J-Z. Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA, 1.

points in the campaign.⁴⁶ The training the Army Air Forces received was sufficient for combat, but only Naval Aviators possessed common knowledge with the men of the fleet. Fitch conceded that Army aviators could learn the ways of the fleet, but they will never have the “nautical instincts deeply rooted as the sea-faring man.”⁴⁷ Admiral Fitch’s testimony reinforced his thoughts that he wrote about in his Naval War College thesis on the importance of common language and culture in building trust. Army aviation and Navy aviation had different ideas about the effective use of aircraft in war. Both services had a common goal of defeating the Japanese, but these differences made the cooperative relationship between them less likely.

By the Battle of the Coral Sea, Admiral Fitch was a well-rounded Navy man due to his experiences and assignments spanning his career. He was liked by the aviators because he was one of them. Fitch earned his wings in 1929 and gained the respect of other pilots. He commanded seaplane tenders, aircraft carriers, and Naval Air Stations. He had operational experience in aviation with his command of Patrol Wing Two and Carrier Division One. Fitch possessed the bona fides of a naval aviator.⁴⁸ Gaining the trust and confidence of aviators was part of what Fitch had accomplished since earning his wings. Admiral Fitch was more than an aviator, however--he was a respected seaman as well. Non-aviators accepted Fitch because of his long service in the fleet. He served on and commanded battleships and mine layers in addition to his work in the Department of the Navy.⁴⁹

Admiral Fitch was well-rounded in both aviation and in the fleet. He was comfortable as a commander and once again had recent combat on his resume. Aubrey Fitch never shied away from a fight and did all he

⁴⁶ Fitch, *Written Testimony*, 2.

⁴⁷ Fitch, *Written Testimony*, 3.

⁴⁸ Hoyt, *How They Won the War in the Pacific*, 114.

⁴⁹ Hoyt, *How They Won the War in the Pacific*, 114.

could to get into the mix at the Battle of Midway. He was sailing back aboard the USS *Saratoga* after its repairs, but he was too late to do more than send his aircraft to reinforce the island after the battle. Fitch was ready to get back in the fight against the Japanese, and that opportunity presented itself when he relieved Admiral John S. McCain as Commander Air, South Pacific (COMAIRSOPAC) on 20 September 1942.



Chapter 3

A Rocky Start

The pre-war experiences of both Admiral Fitch and General Harmon contributed to their thoughts about the effective and efficient use of air power in the South Pacific. The early battles in the Pacific further shaped the views on running a joint air campaign they brought to the South Pacific. The battles of the Coral Sea and Midway did not bring them closer together in their theories regarding proper command and use of air power, and when they first encountered each other in the South Pacific theirs was a formal relationship based on rank and position alone.

General Harmon departed the US to take administrative command of all Army air and ground units in the South Pacific Area on 21 July 1942. This departure date placed him as the COMGENSOPAC before Admiral Fitch arrived and replaced Vice Admiral John McCain as the COMAIRSOPAC. The difference in reporting dates meant General Harmon worked initially with Admiral McCain to establish the organization and command of aircraft in the South Pacific.

In his new command, Harmon assumed responsibility for the entire administration and training of all Army troops and assisted the commander of the South Pacific Area in plans and execution of operations involving Army forces.¹ These responsibilities were clearly defined by the Chief of Staff of the Army, General George C. Marshall, but Harmon desired more authority over the Army Air Forces than a purely administrative and training role. With this end in mind, General

¹ Millard F. Harmon, "The Army in the South Pacific," 6 June 1944, Appendix B. In personal papers of LTG Harmon, 705.04A, IRIS No. 0251243, AFHRA.

Harmon worked with Admiral McCain to establish the normal procedures and organization of aircraft.

McCain had requested Army Aviation personnel as recently as the day before Harmon departed the US for his new position. McCain knew he needed competent flyers who possessed heavy bomber experience and could provide expert advice to him and his staff.² Harmon knew of McCain's requests for Army flyers, and he obliged by sending him personnel that could influence the Admiral in a direction not only advantageous to the war effort, but also to the Army. Admiral McCain expressed to General Harmon in multiple letters his appreciation for the staff Harmon sent him, and continued to request more personnel.³

It is reasonable to assume that these Army officers were influential based on a document Admiral McCain sent to the commanders of the South Pacific Area and the South Pacific Forces dated August 3, 1942. In this document, McCain outlined the impracticability of exercising direct command over such a diverse and dispersed force. He therefore told the commanders that he and Major General Harmon had consulted and agreed upon a set of general principles of command and organization, including the employment of Army air units under the supervision of the Commanding General, South Pacific, General Harmon, and the command of Commander Air, South Pacific, Admiral McCain. Additionally, Island Commanders would appoint an air officer to be the commander of the air forces under the Island Commander, and each of these air commanders required the approval of General Harmon. Finally, if aircraft from two separate defense commanders were involved in an operation, the command of those operations was under McCain when he

² Admiral John S. McCain, Commander Air, South Pacific to General Emmons, letter, July 22, 1942. In personal papers of Admiral John S. McCain, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA, Box 1, Folder 1-6.

³ Admiral John S. McCain, Commander Air, South Pacific to General Harmon, Commanding General, South Pacific, letter, August 21, 1942. In personal papers of Admiral John S. McCain, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA, Box 1, Folder 1-6.

was present in the operations area. When he was not present, the command was under Harmon.⁴ The organization and command of aircraft in the South Pacific as outlined by Admiral McCain gave authority to General Harmon beyond the administration and training of forces. Although Harmon did not believe the organization was completely sound under the principle of unity of command because it forced each defense commander to answer to separate commanders, it worked because, as Harmon later explained, the personalities involved made it work.⁵ Not only did the personalities make it work, the arrangement did what Harmon wanted most: it gave some operational control of Army aviation back to Harmon, even if unofficially.

The organization and command procedures were approved and worked well for both Admiral McCain and General Harmon. These command principles and organizational changes happened at the same time planning for the invasion of Guadalcanal occurred. The planning and preparation for the invasion of Guadalcanal started in late June when Admiral Ghormley, COMSOPAC, received orders to attack the Japanese as soon as possible to continue the advantage the US felt it gained during the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway.⁶ Continued advantage, however, was not the only reason for an attack on Guadalcanal: the Japanese had a pioneer unit on Guadalcanal constructing an airfield which was viewed by the US as a potential launching point for attacks on US bases in New Caledonia.⁷ In support of the invasion of Guadalcanal, Admiral McCain commanded a joint air effort to patrol the Solomon Island areas starting two days before the invasion. The units consisted of Navy, Marine Corps, and Army aircraft.⁸

⁴ This Paragraph derived from *The Army in the South Pacific*, Appendix H.

⁵ Harmon, *The Army in the South Pacific*, 22.

⁶ Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, and Albert Russell Buchanan. *The Navy's Air War, a Mission Completed*. (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1946), 154.

⁷ Eric M. Bergerud. *Fire in the Sky: The Air War in the South Pacific*. (New York, NY, Basic Books, 2009), 557.

⁸ Office of the Chief of Naval Operations and Buchanan, *The Navy's Air War*, 155.

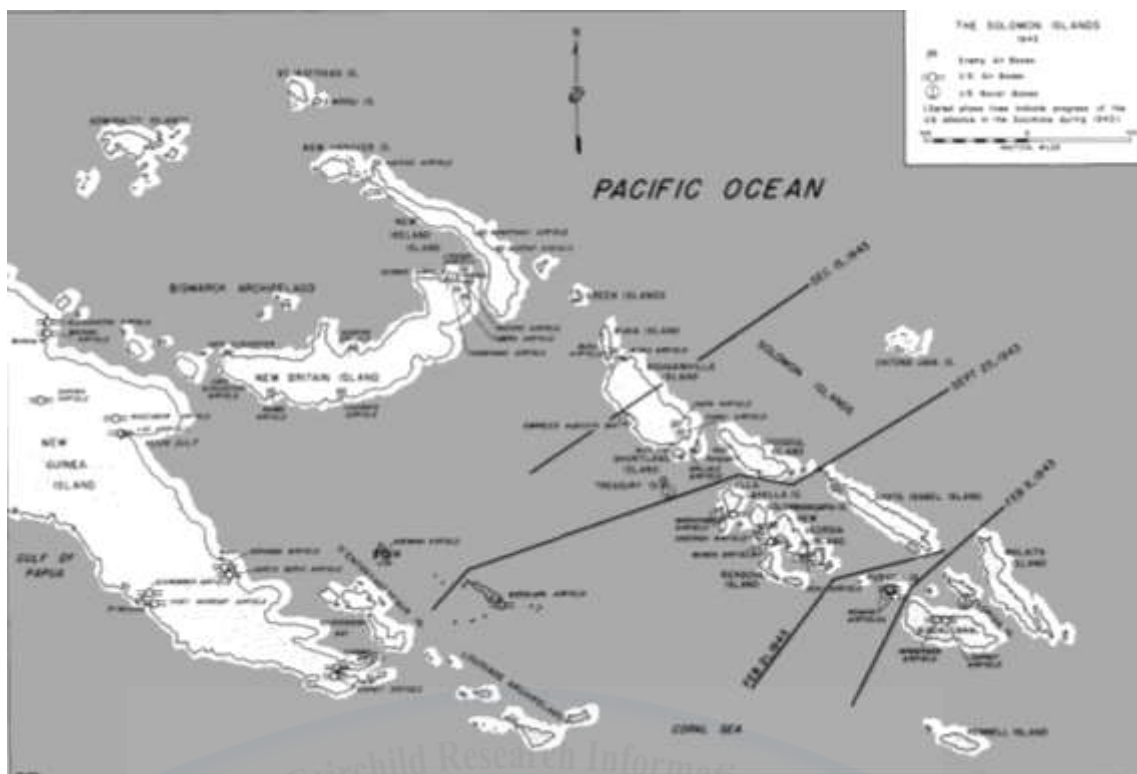


Figure 3: USMC Solomon Island Campaign Map, 1943.

Source: <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/USMC-C-NSol/index.html>

Before dawn on August 7, 1942, troop transports moved toward Tulagi and Guadalcanal. Once the carrier based aircraft conducted initial attacks on aircraft and gun batteries on Tulagi, the order was given to begin the landings on both islands.⁹ On Guadalcanal, codenamed Cactus, the landing proceeded in a relatively permissive environment. Despite the systematic reconnaissance from US aircraft in the days before the invasion, the Japanese were caught by surprise.¹⁰ The element of surprise at Guadalcanal allowed the US to land eleven thousand Marines, who fought their way to and captured the nearly completed Japanese airfield only one day later.¹¹

⁹ Office of the Chief of Naval Operations and Buchanan, *The Navy's Air War*, 155.

¹⁰ Edwin Palmer Hoyt. *How They Won the War in the Pacific; Nimitz and His Admirals*. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1970), 137.

¹¹Hoyt, *How They Won the War*, 138.

The easy landing on Guadalcanal was not indicative of the fights to come. The Marines on Guadalcanal received air cover from both carrier and land based aircraft. The Japanese launched a counteroffensive and only two days after the invasion, the aircraft carriers withdrew and took with them their aircraft.¹² These aircraft were close enough to provide effective support in conjunction with the land based aircraft coming from much greater distances, as the airfield on Guadalcanal did not yet have its own flying units. Without the air cover from the carriers, far-off land based aviation was not as responsive or useful. This situation continued for two weeks as the Marines fought to maintain control of the newly named Henderson Field. On August 20 aircraft began arriving at Henderson Field. Then, the beginning of a joint air command began taking shape as a Marine fighter squadron and dive bomber squadron, Army P-400's, and a Navy dive bomber squadron were all assigned to and present on Henderson Field by the 24th of August.¹³ This joint unit was dubbed the "Cactus Air Force."

The commander of the 1st Marine Air Wing, Brigadier General Roy Geiger, arrived at Guadalcanal on 3 September and took command of all air units in accordance with the command schema already outlined by Harmon and McCain. He was the first Commander, Air Cactus (COMAIRCACTUS), and as such reported to both the commanding general of 1st Marine Division, General Vandegrift, the senior officer on Guadalcanal, and to Admiral McCain who retained operational control of all aircraft as the COMAIRSOPAC.¹⁴ The services were pooled, and Army, Navy, US Marine Corps, and Royal New Zealand Air Force aircraft designed for various missions all flew together in defense of Guadalcanal. General Geiger, with his joint air force, provided missions that varied

¹² James A. Winnefeld and Dana A. Johnson. *Joint Air Operations: Pursuit of Unity in Command and Control, 1942-1991*. (RAND Research Study. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 26.

¹³ Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 26.

¹⁴ Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 29.

from the defense of naval forces to close air support for ground forces and naval interdiction of the enemy, all while welding together a single organization from the parts of many different air forces.¹⁵ All missions were accomplished by each of the service components in the Cactus Air Force. The aircraft and crews that were available when a mission was needed were the ones assigned to fly the mission regardless if the situation was in line with pre-war training. For example, if there was an Army crew ready to fly and the mission was naval interdiction, that crew would fly the mission. Surprisingly, there was little feeling of entitlement for one type of mission or another; the overall objective was more important to the airmen of the Cactus Air Force than the specific mission at hand. More impressive still was that this joint force of land based aviation integrated and flew with the carrier based aviation when it returned to the Solomon Islands.¹⁶

Soon after establishing the procedures and testing them during the initial fight for Guadalcanal, a change in COMAIRSOPAC occurred. After the Battle of the Coral Sea, Admiral Fitch had returned to the South Pacific as the Commander of Carrier Division ONE and Commander U.S. Naval Air Forces, Pacific Fleet. While acting in these capacities, Admiral Fitch had a sudden change of assignment on 14 September 1942 when he received orders to report to the Commander, South Pacific Forces for duty as COMAIRSOPAC.¹⁷ This change of duty appeared to be an unwelcome change to Admiral Fitch, as he received a letter from his friend Admiral Jack Towers at the Navy Department, Bureau of Aeronautics in Washington D.C., assuring Fitch that he [Towers] had nothing to do with the change of assignment and was rather the wish of

¹⁵ Louis Morton, *United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific, Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (1962; new imprint, Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2000), 89.

¹⁶ Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 30.

¹⁷ Admiral Ramsey, Commander (Acting), U.S. Naval Air Forces, Pacific Fleet to Admiral Fitch, Subject: Change of Duty, letter, 17 Sep 1942. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA, Box 3.

the Secretary of the Navy. Additionally, Towers offered to meet with Fitch when he was out in the Pacific to tell him the whole story of why the change occurred.¹⁸ The sudden change of duty and the denial from Towers indicates Admiral Fitch preferred to remain in his role as Commander, U.S. Naval Air Forces, which was a sea-going command at a time of war, the aspiration of Naval officers for centuries. Regardless of Fitch's preferences, Admiral McCain had fulfilled his duty in the South Pacific and was needed in Washington D.C., and Fitch was the obvious choice to fill the role of COMAIRSOPAC. In this position, Admiral Fitch inherited the Solomon area's command structure and procedures along with the ongoing fight in the Solomon Islands.

General Harmon had concerns with the change from Admiral McCain to Admiral Fitch. He expressed to General Arnold that he hated to see McCain leave the South Pacific, and referenced his success at indoctrinating the Admiral through providing staff officers and personal advice. The process of indoctrination, he told Arnold, would start fresh now that Fitch had arrived.¹⁹ General Harmon had a mediocre first impression of Fitch, but tried to relate his good qualities to Arnold: Harmon thought Fitch gave the impression of being a fine officer and a reasonable person with a good personality.²⁰ General Harmon did not opine further on the change of the COMAIRSOPAC, but the relationship with Fitch was at first purely professional.

¹⁸ Admiral Jack Towers to Admiral Aubrey Fitch, letter, 30 September 1942. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA, Box 3.

¹⁹ Maj Gen Millard F. Harmon, Commanding General, South Pacific, to Lt Gen H.H. Arnold, Chief of Staff, USAAF, letter, 15 September 1942, in personal papers of LTG Harmon, 705.451A, IRIS No. 0251295, AFHRA.

²⁰ Harmon, *Letter to Lt Gen H.H. Arnold*, 15 September 1942.



Figure 4: COMAIRSOPAC change of command 20 September 1942. Front row, 2nd from right, Major General Millard F. Harmon, COMGENSOPAC. 3rd from right, Rear Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, incoming COMAIRSOPAC. 4th from right, Vice Admiral John S. McCain, outgoing COMAIRSOPAC. **Source:** Admiral Fitch personal collection, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA

A month after Admiral Fitch took over as COMAIRSOPAC, the Commander, South Pacific also changed from Vice Admiral Ghormley to Vice Admiral William F. Halsey. From the moment of his assumption of command, Halsey changed the tone of the forces in the South Pacific. He replaced the feeling of separate services having diverse interests with an emphasis on the principle of being one force with the sole mission of defeating Japan. Halsey emphasized no single service or branch within a service had a greater share in that mission; all were equal and needed to

fight as the single force.²¹ Harmon noted the shift and later attributed Halsey's success to their shared belief in, and adherence to, the principle of unity of command.

During the two months following the COMAIRSOPAC change of command, little evidence exists suggesting Admiral Fitch and General Harmon corresponded, although certainly informal exchanges took place. This gap in correspondence is understandable, as operations continued and the situation on Guadalcanal deteriorated in such a manner that Fitch was fully occupied by efforts to provide relief to the embattled island. The Japanese consistently shelled Henderson Field and the resupply ships that attempted to provide fuel, ammunition, and all other necessities of life. The situation grew desperate in mid-October 1942 as the Japanese intensified their air attacks. Fewer US aircraft were capable of flying to defend against the attacks. On the 14th of October, reconnaissance aircraft of the Cactus Air Force spotted a large group of six transports and eight destroyers the Japanese planned to use to shell Henderson Field while they also reinforced their ground units in an effort to retake Guadalcanal.²²

The state of the Cactus Air Force was then dire. The seeming inevitability of the coming defeat did not weigh down the men of Cactus, however. Rather it spurred them to work harder together to defend Henderson Field. Marine ground crews worked to repair not only their aircraft but Army and Navy aircraft as well. When enough planes were operational, the Marines and Army aviators took off and flew together, attacking Japanese transports until darkness fell. The Fourteenth of November was just such a showcase of a joint air operation. Spotter aircraft from the Royal New Zealand Army Air Force sighted Japanese transports moving toward Guadalcanal. Navy and Marine aircraft were

²¹ Harmon, *The Army in the South Pacific*, 22.

²² Thomas Guy Miller. *The Cactus Air Force*. 1st Ed. ed. (New York: A Bantam Book by Harper & Row, 1981), 125.

joined by Army B-17's and attacked the transports. The efforts of these aviators who worked together yielded four transports sunk, four transports burning and dead in the water, and four transports limping toward Guadalcanal.²³ This combined effort was possible because ground crews drained fuel from wrecked B-17s on the airfield to refuel aircraft when they landed.²⁴

After the battle, General Geiger updated the new COMAIRSOPAC, Admiral Fitch, of his depleted reserves of aircraft and fuel. Upon receipt of Geiger's update, Fitch ordered Marine pilots to Espiritu Santo to ferry 17 Navy dive bombers to Cactus and then reinforce with 20 of their own fighters. Additionally, Fitch tackled the gas problem when he ordered every available Army and Marine transport aircraft to Cactus with barrels of gas.²⁵ Admiral Fitch's decisive actions to move aircraft and fuel in support of Guadalcanal surely put a premium on good relationship with Harmon as he moved Army personnel and equipment.

The following day, Geiger managed to continue flight operations with gas drained from more disabled aircraft. Ground crews and air crews all worked together for over two days, and the division of labor was decided only by what needed to be done to get aircraft in the air to defend Guadalcanal. Relief arrived that afternoon in the form of eleven B-17s from Espiritu Santo. The B-17s bombed transport ships and slowed the advantage the Japanese had gained as more troops arrived on shore.²⁶ The following days gave hope to the Cactus Air Force and they never fully disengaged from the enemy. Slowly, the situation on Cactus became manageable, but only through the joint efforts and teamwork exhibited by all the airmen and their leaders.

²³ Office of the Chief of Naval Operations and Buchanan, *The Navy's Air War*, 165.

²⁴ Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 126.

²⁵ Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 127.

²⁶ Miller, *The Cactus Air Force*, 133.

With the dire situation on Cactus in the past, Harmon sent a letter to Fitch advising the new COMAIRSOPAC that he was sending an Air Corps colonel to work on his staff to consult in and help plan any air taskings involving the use of heavy bombers and Army fighters. This single letter is evidence of at least sporadic direct communications, despite the lack of other formal letters.²⁷ In addition, Harmon sent members of his personal staff to work directly for Fitch, showing that Harmon once again started the indoctrination process to get the new COMAIRSOPAC on board with previously established guidance and to conform to the principle of unity of command as Admiral Halsey wanted. Of note is the formality of the letter, addressed to Admiral Fitch and signed with the formal signature, Millard F. Harmon. Their relationship was new, formal, and still developing.

For weeks thereafter, the relationship between Fitch and Harmon continued as a professional one based on position. Upon notification of Fitch's promotion to Vice Admiral, a new aspect to the relationship developed. General Harmon sent a short note to Fitch, showing his respect, but not his personal congratulations. Harmon's note again was signed Millard F. Harmon and was short and to the point. He said the Army personnel in the South Pacific were happy to learn of the promotion.²⁸

Admiral Fitch, presumably sensing a relationship that needed to be more than professional, responded to General Harmon a month later when Harmon received his third star. This letter was personal and expressed Fitch's "hearty congratulations" on a "well-deserved [sic] promotion." Fitch expressed to Harmon that he had had a personal

²⁷ Maj Gen Harmon, Commanding General, South Pacific, to Admiral Fitch, Commander Air, South Pacific, letter, 26 November 1942. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA, Box 3.

²⁸ Maj Gen Harmon, Commanding General, South Pacific, to Admiral Fitch, Commander Air, South Pacific, letter, 2 January 1943. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA, Box 2, Folder Dispatches and Correspondence 1943.

desire that they both receive their third stars at the same time.²⁹ Admiral Fitch concluded his letter telling General Harmon he had great satisfaction working with him over the past four and a half months and looked forward to their continued work together toward the common end.³⁰ The feeling was mutual, as Harmon focused on the Japanese defeat, but tension grew as Harmon's perception that Fitch was on a path away from sound principles of unity of command. Guadalcanal was declared secure by the US on February 8, 1943, and with the fight continuing north in Solomons, Harmon felt he needed to reinforce the previously agreed principles of command for air assets with his new partner.



²⁹ Admiral Fitch, Commander Air, South Pacific, to Lieutenant General Harmon, Commanding General, South Pacific, letter, 11 February 1943. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA, Box 2, Folder Dispatches and Correspondence 1943.

³⁰ Fitch, *Letter*, 11 February 1943.

Chapter 4

Evolution to Efficiency

Harmon knew Fitch had a good personality and, based on the warming relationship, appreciated Fitch's praise and personal congratulations on his promotion. Despite the thaw, however, during the spring of 1943 Harmon increasingly saw Fitch not adhering to the principle of unity of command as embraced by Admiral Halsey and developed by Harmon and McCain. This perception by Harmon impeded the development of their relationship. Harmon felt Fitch did not comply with the precepts of the organization of air units that was still the policy in the theater. Specifically, Harmon did not like flying missions that were mismatched to the training, tactics, and procedures of the Army units. Where Admiral Fitch saw an advantage in using B-17s for long-distance reconnaissance missions, Harmon knew the crews, although capable of learning, were not trained for such missions. Beyond specific training, which Harmon was directly responsible for in his role as Commanding General, South Pacific, he saw the use of B-17s in this role as diminishing the striking power available to the overall force.¹

Establishment of an Air Force specifically for the South Pacific was an idea Harmon pushed to General Arnold as a means to gain more than administrative control over these kinds of issues. Harmon argued that effective employment, better preparedness, and distribution of Army aircraft were all attainable with an altered command structure.² Specifically General Arnold wanted the South Pacific Air Force established and asked the Army Chief of Staff, General Marshall, for

¹ United States Air Force Historical Division, Edited by: Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate. *The Army Air Forces in World War II, Volume Four, The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan, August 1942 to July 1944*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 68.

² Craven, *AAF in WWII volume Four*, 70.

approval. On 5 December 1942, General Marshall sent a dispatch to General Harmon that informed him all Army Air Forces units in the South Pacific henceforth would comprise the Thirteenth Air Force.³ Following this establishment, the Thirteenth Air Force was activated on 13 January 1943, with Major General Nathan Twining as the first commander.⁴ With the Thirteenth Air Force under his command, General Harmon felt he had the principle of unity of command even more firmly entrenched, and approached Halsey directly about the pattern of departure from established guidance regarding consultation on training, supply, and best uses of Army aviation in general. Halsey directed Harmon to work it out with Fitch, and told him he would abide by their decisions if they could agree.⁵

Halsey's direction for General Harmon and Admiral Fitch to meet was the catalyst that began a relationship between the two, becoming the basis for friendship and openness, which undoubtedly led to a more effective air campaign in the Solomon Islands. General Harmon approached the conference with Admiral Fitch in the early days of March 1943 with the attitude that the tendency to draw away from the principles outlined in the McCain and Ghormley approved instructions were a result of a lack of understanding. Harmon did not direct his criticism over the lack of understanding towards Fitch; instead he argued that subordinate commanders and staff officers were to blame.⁶

The conference between Admiral Fitch and General Harmon occurred on the 2nd and 3rd of March, 1943. Harmon recorded the discussions and agreements which Admiral Fitch approved and distributed to all air commanders in the South Pacific. The principles

³ Craven, *AAF in WWII volume Four*, 71.

⁴ Louis Morton and United States Department of the Army, Office of Military History. *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*. United States Army in World War II. War in the Pacific. (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2000) 403.

⁵ Morton, *The Army in the South Pacific*, 30.

⁶ Morton, *The Army in the South Pacific*, 30.

governing the employment of aircraft was another step closer for Harmon gaining greater control over Army Air Forces under his command. Although Harmon did not gain operational control of the Army Air Forces, he firmly reestablished the roles and functions of each component commander under the Joint Force Commander. Harmon and Fitch agreed the Commanding General of the Thirteenth Air Force would be consulted in all matters pertaining to Army aviation in the theater. Effectively, these procedures gave a sense of operational control through consultation, even without delegation of actual operational control, of Army Air Forces back to General Harmon and the Army. In effect, these procedures ensured effectiveness through the employment of aircraft by their individual services and relieved the perception that Fitch was not following the principle of unity of command.⁷

Admiral Fitch agreed to all of General Harmon's proposals that reinforced the past policies of Admirals McCain and Ghormley and strengthened Army pseudo-operational control over Army Air Forces. Harmon was undoubtedly pleased to resolve the misunderstandings and noted that Admiral Fitch thereafter adhered to the agreed-upon principles during his time as COMAIRSOPAC. Harmon further identified Fitch's adherence to the principles of organization and employment as the reason for effective utilization of Army aircraft during the campaign.⁸

After their conference, General Harmon credited Admiral Fitch with developing the Island Defense commander position in the Solomon Islands to include an air officer in charge of all air operations on each island. The first and most well-documented instance of this was Fitch's recommendation and appointment by Halsey of the Commander Air Solomons.⁹ The focus on the Solomon Islands had led the Pentagon to

⁷ Millard F. Harmon, "The Army in the South Pacific, Appendix E. Principles and Policies governing employment of Air Force Units," 4 March 1943.

⁸ Harmon, *The Army in the South Pacific*, 30.

⁹ Harmon, *The Army in the South Pacific*, 31.

establish a sub-unified command under COMAIRSOPAC. This new command was aptly named Command, Aircraft, Solomons or in its shortened version, COMAIRSOLS.¹⁰ This new command became one of the most integrated commands of the WWII Pacific theater.

COMAIRSOLS staff started as a reflection of the 1st Marine Air Wing on Guadalcanal, but developed into an organization staffed with Army, Navy, Marine and Royal New Zealand officers.¹¹ The command of COMAIRSOLS rotated every two to three months between each of the US service components. The first three commanders were from the USMC followed by two Navy admirals. On 25 July 1943, Major General Twining became COMAIRSOLS. From this point forward, the operations of the Thirteenth Air Force and COMAIRSOLS were often indistinguishable.¹² The change in command between the services reinforced Halsey's idea that the men fighting the Solomon Islands campaign were a single force with all services and branches being equal. The missions of COMAIRSOLS were truly a joint effort. It was normal to have heavy bombers from the Army fly missions to the same targets at the same time as dive bombers and torpedo planes from the Marines, and they all received protection from the fighter escorts of all the services.¹³

The joint-mindedness of COMAIRSOLS was on display for Operation Vengeance. On April 14, 1943, the US learned the exact itinerary of an inspection tour by the architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto. The timeline was tight as Yamamoto planned to arrive at Ballale Island only four days later on the morning of the 18th.¹⁴ Just one day before his arrival, Fitch gave the order to Rear Admiral Marc Mitscher, the COMAIRSOLS, to prepare and

¹⁰ Eric M. Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky: The Air War in the South Pacific*. (New York, NY, Basic Books, 2009), 434.

¹¹ Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 31.

¹² Craven, *AAF in WWII volume Four*, 204.

¹³ Craven, *AAF in WWII volume Four*, 204.

¹⁴ Thomas Alexander Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey: A Naval Life*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 266.

execute the mission. Mitscher had a wide variety of aircraft to choose from for the 1000 miles plus round trip mission to shoot down Yamamoto's aircraft.¹⁵ After considering the options, Mitscher found the only aircraft capable of such a long distance mission were the Army's P-38s. Retrofitted with drop tanks from the Marine Corps, eighteen Army P-38s gained the endurance necessary for the long flight. The P-38s lacked not only the range, but also the ability to navigate the complex route that kept them from detection by the Japanese. The aircraft needed and used Navy navigation aids.¹⁶ With the aircraft ready for the mission, with the additional parts from the Navy and Marines, the crews received a briefing on the importance of the mission and the intended target.

The aircraft took off from Guadalcanal. One aircraft blew a tire, and another had problems with fuel flow from the newly attached Marine drop tanks. Only 16 P-38s made the long flight at altitudes of only 10-30 feet to avoid Japanese detection.¹⁷ The scheduled mission was the longest intercept mission of the war. As the critical time approached, the Japanese aircraft and the P-38s came in contact. The Army aviators arrived a minute before the fixed time for Yamamoto's arrival and attacked the flight of two aircraft as they descended to land on the Island. Yamamoto died in the attack. Operation Vengeance was successful and proved the effectiveness of joint operations in a manner visible to the world.¹⁸

Ejection of the Japanese from Guadalcanal and the subsequent success of Operation Vengeance provided momentum that Admiral Halsey wanted to maintain the US focus on the Solomon Islands. Halsey wanted to continue north in the Solomon Islands as he had been

¹⁵ Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 267.

¹⁶ Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 267.

¹⁷ Prados, *Islands of Destiny*, 272.

¹⁸ Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 267-268.

successful earlier in the year with the near uncontested invasion of the Russel Islands.¹⁹ The next prize in the island chain was New Georgia. In conjunction with General MacArthur and his staff, the commanders of the South Pacific and South West Pacific and their staffs planned Operation TOENAILS.²⁰ Halsey and Fitch provided carrier and land based aircraft for joint raids on the main Japanese airfields. These raids comprised 40 and 50 aircraft that attacked the airfields at Vila and Munda.²¹ With the preparatory strikes complete, the invasion of New Georgia commenced on 30 June 1943.

The invasion was brutal for the ground troops. Halsey received many requests for air support and in turn tasked Fitch to provide the requested missions from his command. Support to the ground forces came from the Royal New Zealand Air Force, USMC tactical units, and the heavy bombers of the Thirteenth Air Force from the COMAIRSOLS.²² The air support not only served as direct support to ground forces but worked as spotters for their artillery strikes. The pilots helped artillerymen hone in on their targets during the day, which would then be shelled during the night to keep the Japanese from advancing in a counteroffensive.²³

During all requests for air support, Admiral Fitch and General Harmon remained engaged with the men flying and fighting. To be a visible presence, Fitch was an active COMAIRSOPAC who flew missions and visited his personnel as frequently as possible. The activity of Admiral Fitch did not go unnoticed by General Harmon. In further evidence of a warming relationship, General Harmon recognized Admiral Fitch when he surprised him with the presentation of the Army Distinguished Flying Cross on 2 July 1943. In the citation, Harmon

¹⁹ Prados, *Islands of Destiny*, 242.

²⁰ Prados, *Islands of Destiny*, 285.

²¹ Prados, *Islands of Destiny*, 285.

²² Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky*, 608.

²³ Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky*, 608.

noted Fitch's propensity for visiting and inspecting areas involved in current air operations as well as finding sites for future development to establish new areas from which to operate.²⁴



Figure 5: Lieutenant General Harmon awards the Distinguished Flying Cross to Vice Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, 2 July 1943. **Source:** Admiral Fitch personal collection, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA

Admiral Fitch wrote of his surprise that General Harmon held a party for him and awarded him the DFC. True to his character, Fitch attributed the award not to his accomplishments but rather to the achievements of the men under his command. Admiral Fitch was impressed enough with the award and gesture by General Harmon that he arranged to have the medal taken and presented to his wife in Coronado, CA.²⁵

Shortly after presenting Admiral Fitch with the Army Distinguished Flying Cross, General Harmon was pressed back into service as the Commanding General, South Pacific. Harmon disagreed with the New

²⁴ Citation for the Award of the Distinguished Flying Cross, 25 June 1943. In the personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 3, Folder: Dispatches and Correspondence 1943.

²⁵ Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Commander Air, South Pacific to Captain Moebus, letter, July 2, 1943. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 2, Folder Dispatches and Correspondence 1943.

Georgia invasion force commander, Admiral Turner, concerning the efficacy of the occupation force commander, Major General John Hester. General Harmon lost confidence in Hester's ability to capture the Munda airfield, the fight for which had become a quagmire.²⁶ Harmon's lack of confidence in Hester, coupled with Admiral Turner's desire to retain Hester, led General Harmon to address the issue with Halsey. Halsey agreed with Harmon, and Hester was relieved by Major General Oscar Griswold.

On 13 July, Griswold sent a report to Harmon that the operations on New Georgia were not going well. He candidly told Harmon he did not think it was possible to take Munda airfield with the forces he had.²⁷ With this new information, Harmon met with Halsey about the situation on New Georgia. During that meeting, Halsey told Harmon to assume complete control of the ground operations on New Georgia and, "take whatever steps necessary to facilitate the capture of the airfield."²⁸ Harmon took control of the ground operations and seized control of the Munda airfield and then focused on the seizure of Vila airfield. With that, Harmon, a longtime airman, became responsible for the ground conquest of the next airfields used in continuing North in the Solomon Islands. The New Georgia campaign was hard fought but ultimately won with the leadership of Harmon on the ground and Fitch providing support in the air. This new development surely played a role in the continued positive growth of Harmon's and Fitch's relationship.

After the invasion of New Georgia, Harmon and Fitch continued to work together toward the common end of defeating the Japanese from the air and the ground. The next move north was the invasion of Vella Lavella. Taking this island was a preparatory step for the eventual invasion of Bougainville and a gamble as the operation was designed to

²⁶ Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 509.

²⁷ Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 509.

²⁸ Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 510.

bypass the 12,000 strong Kolombangara Island garrison and the Vila airstrip to which most of the Japanese from Munda had fled.²⁹ The invasion of Vella Lavella was successful in two important aspects: The first success came in the form of better morale. The Solomon Islands campaign to this point had been a brutal battle of attrition. Taking islands from the Japanese was costly in men, equipment, and time. Vella Lavella was lightly defended by the Japanese and therefore produced a relatively quick victory with few casualties. The second success at Vella Lavella centered around the airfield created out of a jungle by the Navy Seabees.³⁰ The dual threat airfields at Munda, which hosted the largest bombers in the region, and the newly minted Vella Lavella airstrip accommodating over 100 planes a day, were ready in time for the next jump North in the island chain.³¹

The lesson learned from the victory on Vella Lavella was that going around the enemy was a viable option. There was no need to attack directly the enemy strongholds. This lesson weighed on Harmon and Fitch as they advised Halsey against moving directly toward the Japanese stronghold on Southern Bougainville.³² The plan evolved with the lessons of successful previous island hopping operations in the theater, and eventually, Halsey decided his best course of action was to invade the island of Bougainville near Torokina on the West coast. This area was lightly defended and nearly inaccessible, which meant Halsey gained valuable time to build an airfield before any Japanese counterattack. The plan was risky and required the constant bombardment of the Japanese airfields at Kahili, Ballale, and Kara on the southern end of the island.³³ Admiral Fitch called for the destruction of Japanese airfields and the COMAIRSOLS, General Twining, set the

²⁹ Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 296.

³⁰ Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 297.

³¹ Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 297.

³² Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 247.

³³ Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 252.

date of 1 November 1943 as the mission complete date. Twining used the immense fleet of aircraft at his disposal. The missions were flown jointly, as was the practice since the beginning of the Cactus Air Force the previous fall. The flights were joint and massive. The problems of the early days on Guadalcanal were in the distant past. Illustratively, on 26 October 1943, Twining sent a strike force against the Kahili airfield which consisted of 36 TBFs, 49 SBDs, 24 B-24s with a fighter escort comprised of 36 F6Fs, 10 P-39s, and 23 P-40s.³⁴ All services and squadrons from COMAIRSOLS worked together to accomplish Admiral Fitch's order to neutralize the enemy airfields in preparation for the 1 November invasion, often participating in the exact same mission. By the 31st of October, Twining declared all Japanese airfields on the South of Bougainville inoperative. The invasion and building of a new US airfield at Torokina was ready to begin the next day.

Throughout all this activity, Halsey was directly influenced by both Harmon and Fitch as they worked together to present a united front to influence the options considered, missions planned, and execution of the missions as Halsey continued North through the Solomon Islands. Fitch and Harmon worked together to build air attack plans that satisfied their commander's intent. This experience in working closely with each other continued to build their trust in one another professionally and personally. General Harmon ensured the relationship grew by continued efforts to send officers to work on Admiral Fitch's staff. The exchange of officers kept the lines of communication open even when their duties precluded direct interaction with each other.

In a personal letter to Fitch in November 1943, during the continued operations on Bougainville, Harmon mentioned that his younger brother, Major General Hubert R. "H.R." Harmon was with him getting to know the procedures of the South Pacific. General M.F.

³⁴ Morton, *Strategy and Command*, 254.

Harmon emphasized Halsey's vision of a single South Pacific Force to his younger brother, H.R throughout this familiarization process.³⁵ General Harmon in this same letter offered his brother H.R. to work on Admiral Fitch's staff in any capacity deemed appropriate. Harmon not only continued to show a building relationship of trust with this gesture, but he also ensured he would continue to have a trusted officer close to the COMAIRSOPAC. Fitch accepted the offer and used H.R. Harmon on his staff. While he was only there for just over a month, H.R. was the deputy COMAIRSOPAC under Fitch before taking command of the 13th Air Force in January 1944 and later as the second AAF general to command COMAIRSOLS.

The letter to Fitch continued and was not restricted to business. This letter was the first evidence of a personal relationship between the two. Harmon thanked Fitch for delivering pictures from his wife, Alberta. The delivery of pictures from a wife to a man in a war zone showed a significant level of friendship and trust. Harmon surely was involved in procuring the photos by providing Fitch a location to pick up the pictures from his wife. The trust shown in this simple gesture of delivering personal photos means the relationship had developed to a point where home and family discussion existed. Harmon finished his letter to Fitch, expressing a desire to see him in person soon to sit down and discuss the "people at home."³⁶ Harmon also changed the way he signed his letter, simply signing "Harmon." From this letter forward, the familiarity between the two increased.

Five months later, at the end of April 1944, close to the time SOPAC discontinued active operations, Admiral Fitch received notice of reassignment from COMAIRSOPAC to Washington D.C. in the position of

³⁵ Lt Gen Millard F. Harmon, Commanding General, South Pacific to Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Commander Air, South Pacific, letter, November 25, 1943. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 2, Folder Dispatches and Correspondence 1943.

³⁶ Harmon, *Letter to Admiral Fitch*, November 25, 1943.

Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air). This new assignment came as a surprise to both Harmon and Fitch, as well as the men under their commands. There was no time for an in-person farewell, so Fitch wrote a letter to General Harmon expressing his personal regrets in not saying a proper goodbye.³⁷ In this letter, Fitch told Harmon the success in building the best combined and joint Air Force in the world was due in large part to the understanding and cooperation of the commanders in each service. He then thanked General Harmon for his kindly advice and suggestions, which he called invaluable.³⁸

Admiral Fitch closed his letter to General Harmon noting he had a feeling of real regret that their association, both professional and personal, was severed so early. Fitch did not only regret the termination of the relationship but also proposed they should strive to renew the relationship again in the near future.³⁹ This letter was Fitch's final goodbye and demonstrated the evolution of their relationship as it was the first letter addressed to "Miff" and not General Harmon. Additionally, this letter represented the only personal letter in Admiral Fitch's personal files that he sent to any other commander in the South Pacific upon his departure.

Although Fitch's papers only have this goodbye letter from his departure, he received letters and praise from General H.R. Harmon, Thirteenth Air Force commander, thanking him for teaching him leadership and the possibilities of sincere cooperation. Additionally, General Nate Twining, then commander of the Fifteenth Air Force, sent a letter to Admiral Fitch upon his reassignment to Washington D.C. reminiscing about the many hours spent on and off duty with the

³⁷ Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Commander Air, South Pacific to General Harmon, Commanding General, South Pacific, letter, April 29, 1944. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 1, Folder General Correspondence A-I.

³⁸ Fitch, *Letter to General Harmon*, April 29, 1944.

³⁹ Fitch, *Letter to General Harmon*, April 29, 1944.

Admiral. Twining called this a highly-treasured period of his service.⁴⁰ These letters from Army generals to the outgoing Navy admiral and COMAIRSOPAC show the evolution of Admiral Fitch from one who needed consoling from Admiral Towers to a leader that truly embraced his role as the combined forces commander.

Although the letters to Admiral Fitch from Generals H.R. Harmon and Nate Twining spoke to the respect these men had for the outgoing COMAIRSOPAC, the letter from M.F. Harmon to Fitch demonstrated the strength of a good professional and personal relationship. Harmon addressed his letter to “Jake.” The change in greeting seems small, but only Admiral Fitch’s friends called him Jake, not acquaintances. Harmon told Fitch of his pride in working with him, and that he regretted the reassignment. Harmon noted the short duration of only a year and a half of their knowing each other but remarked that the relationship was not only profitable for the war effort but also pleasant for him personally.⁴¹ Harmon praised Fitch for his understanding, tolerance, adherence to sound principles, and most of all for his inspiring leadership. Harmon attributed the success in building the impossible: a single force merged from four separate forces—to Fitch’s professional qualities.⁴² General Harmon closed his letter wishing Fitch continued success and happiness and simply signed “Miff.”

The war in the South Pacific continued, and the correspondence between General Harmon and Admiral Fitch stopped. The lack of communication is understandable as General Harmon continued in his duties as COMGENSOPAC as the Solomon Islands Campaign marched

⁴⁰ General Nathan Twining, Commander, Fifteenth Air Force to Admiral Fitch, letter, June 16, 1944. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 1. Folder General Correspondence J-Z.

⁴¹ Lt Gen Millard F. Harmon, Commanding General, South Pacific to Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Commander Air, South Pacific, letter, 17 May 1944. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 1. Folder General Correspondence A-I.

⁴² Harmon, *Letter to Jake from Miff*, 17 May 1944

up the island chain, and Admiral Fitch was fully engaged in his new assignment as the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air). Tragedy struck the Harmon family when General Harmon went missing on February 26, 1945 and no trace of him, his aircraft, or the other members of his party were ever found. As a testament to their friendship and as a final act of kindness to General Harmon, Admiral Fitch took time from his official duties to send a personal telegram to Miff's wife, Alberta. On 3 March 1945, Fitch told Mrs. Harmon, he was "deeply distressed to learn that the General has been reported missing. The entire naval aeronautical organization joins me in extending sympathy."⁴³ The hard-earned relationship that helped foster a more effective air campaign in the Solomon Islands had ended.

Admiral Fitch remained in the Navy after World War II and served in various capacities. Most notably, he was the first Naval Aviator who served as the Superintendent of the Naval Academy.⁴⁴ Admiral Fitch left the Naval Academy and shortly thereafter retired from the Navy on 1 July 1947 after a retirement board deemed him permanently incapacitated.⁴⁵ Although the Navy retirement board deemed Admiral Fitch incapacitated and no longer able to serve in the armed forces, he lived 31 more years in retirement until his death on 22 May, 1978.

⁴³ Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, to Mrs. Millard Harmon, telegram, 3 March 1945. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA. Box 1, Folder General Correspondence A-I.

⁴⁴ Biography of Admiral Aubrey Fitch, Naval History and Heritage Command. Accessed at <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/a/aubrey-fitch.html>

⁴⁵ John L. Sullivan, Acting Secretary of the Navy, to Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Letter, 32 July 1947. In personal papers of Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA, Box 2.

Conclusion

Operating in the joint and combined environment now and in the future demands a study of effective combined and joint air operations. Many military professionals turn to the shining--and relatively recent--example of air operations during Desert Storm in 1991. This operation featured inter-service harmony and devastating effects that are still pondered and taught to air officers as the standard to which they should aspire. Joint publications and doctrine draw examples from the post-cold war era of air power to educate future leaders. Yet perhaps an equally fine example of the effective employment of joint and combined air power comes from a much earlier time, during which many of today's accepted doctrines first emerged.

The War Department published Field Manual 100-20 on 21 July 1943. FM 100-20 was the guiding document on the Command and Employment of Air Power, as it is titled. The current joint publication 3-30, Command and Control of Joint Air Operations, incorporates many of its ideas about proper command and employment of air power in war. The influence is showcased with not only a quote from FM 100-20 on page two of chapter one, but the ideas and principles laid out in the earlier 14-page field manual permeate the entire Joint Publication.¹

FM 100-20 asserts that land and air power are equal and interdependent forces, with neither being an auxiliary to the other.² This continues with many axioms current Air Force personnel will find familiar. Air power should be centrally controlled through an Air Force commander.³ It continues by addressing the basic tasks of an Air Force, first of which is the destruction of enemy air forces; commonly expressed

¹ United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, and JCS. *Command and Control for Joint Air Operations*. Joint Pub; 3-30. Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2010.

² Field Manual 100-20 pp.1

³ FM 100-20 pp. 4

in the modern Air Force as air superiority. FM 100-20 emphasizes the necessity of joint planning and training to assure successful operations.⁴ Clearly, FM 100-20 contains many ideas still used in the modern Air Force.

It drew its inspiration from events proximate to its publication in 1943. To this end, this paper examined the early lives of two influential flag officers charged with air operations during the Solomons air campaign: Rear Admiral Aubrey “Jake” Wray Fitch and Lieutenant General Millard “Miff” Harmon. Their early career assignments and experiences greatly influenced their ideas about the use air power well before World War II and the Solomon Island campaign. In addition to their views on air power, the personal relationship developed by these men of varied backgrounds was forged and developed while they were charged with fighting a war against an enemy determined to protect the gains achieved in the Pacific theater. The personalities involved shaped the strategy used to overcome substantial odds in a theater deemed secondary to the fight in Europe. Beyond the direct relationship developed between RADM Fitch and LTG Harmon, other personalities in positions of influence played significant roles in developing the strategic, operational, and tactical situation. If the wrong people with different visions for the fight in the Pacific had come together at the same time in history, the outcome of the war with Japan during WWII may have been costlier in lives and equipment, and ultimate victory might have taken more time to accomplish.

Strategy is a human endeavor, and getting strategy right often relies on the correct ordering of human relationships.⁵ If there is a valuable lesson to glean from this paper, it is that continuous learning, understanding, and a desire to work together toward a common goal

⁴ FM 100-20, pp. 4

⁵ Thomas Hughes, quote in seminar discussion at the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 14 February, 2017.

makes better flag officers who have increased capacity to excel in joint operations. This process is one that shapes ideas and values throughout a lifetime and career, and therefore cannot be postponed.

The buildup to the Solomons air campaign started well before the Allied landing on Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942. The battle of Midway played a significant role in how the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army viewed the proper use of aviation. This pivotal battle in the Pacific is often cited as the turning point where the Japanese began losing ground in the Pacific and where the tide shifted in favor of the United States. Although this battle was significant as one of the first opportunities to strike back at Japanese forces which attacked Pearl Harbor six months earlier, it was not the turning point in the Pacific. Even after the battle of Midway, the military balance still favored the Japanese.⁶

Not only did the military balance continue to favor the Japanese, but the disputes over the correct use of air power between the Army and Navy had the potential to undermine a cohesive joint campaign if the right people had not been in place to exercise command and control of naval, ground, and air forces moving forward in the advance on the Japanese empire. Parochial attitudes may have distressed the American fighting forces in WWII, just as they have the same potential today if service specific interest triumphs over singlemindedness in defeating the enemy.

The analysis of the relationship of Harmon and Fitch and the Solomon Islands campaign teaches valuable lessons of perseverance in the face of overwhelming adversity. The ability of commanders to overcome their service loyalties, without abandoning their core beliefs, proved essential for the greater good of achieving overall victory in war. This attitude of victory over service interests fosters an environment of

⁶ Prados, John. *Islands of Destiny: The Solomons Campaign and the Eclipse of the Rising Sun*. New York: New American Library, 2012. pp. xv

innovation, regardless of precedence. Harmon and Fitch taught that Army, Navy, Marine Corps and allied partners can fight together in ways not previously imagined. Carrier aviation can operate from land effectively, and the pilots from each service can become one in purpose to defeat an enemy.⁷

The case of the Solomons air campaign provides an avenue for understanding how relationships and common goals can create a command environment that values unity, not competition. Better understanding in this area aids in the pursuit of unity of command and control in the battlespaces of today and the future. Unity does not absolve a commander from finding better methods for command. General Harmon continuously strived to gain more control over Army aviation beyond the administrative. He approached this task as a way to synergize airpower in the South Pacific, not only as a means of gathering power for himself and the Army. Harmon had success in gaining more control while he simultaneously provided the best support to the COMAIRSOPAC. Looking specifically at the personal and command relationships of RADM Fitch and LTG Harmon during the Solomons air campaign provides a template for Air Force officers to follow in pursuit of command beyond the Joint Forces Air Component Commander. Pursuing this aspiration assuredly requires more education to explore new and unfamiliar areas.⁸

⁷ Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, and Albert Russell Buchanan. *The Navy's Air War, a Mission Completed*. (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1946), 154.

⁸ Thomas Alexander Hughes. "A General Airman, Millard Harmon and the South Pacific in World War II," *Joint Forces Quarterly* issue no. 52, 2009, 162.

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